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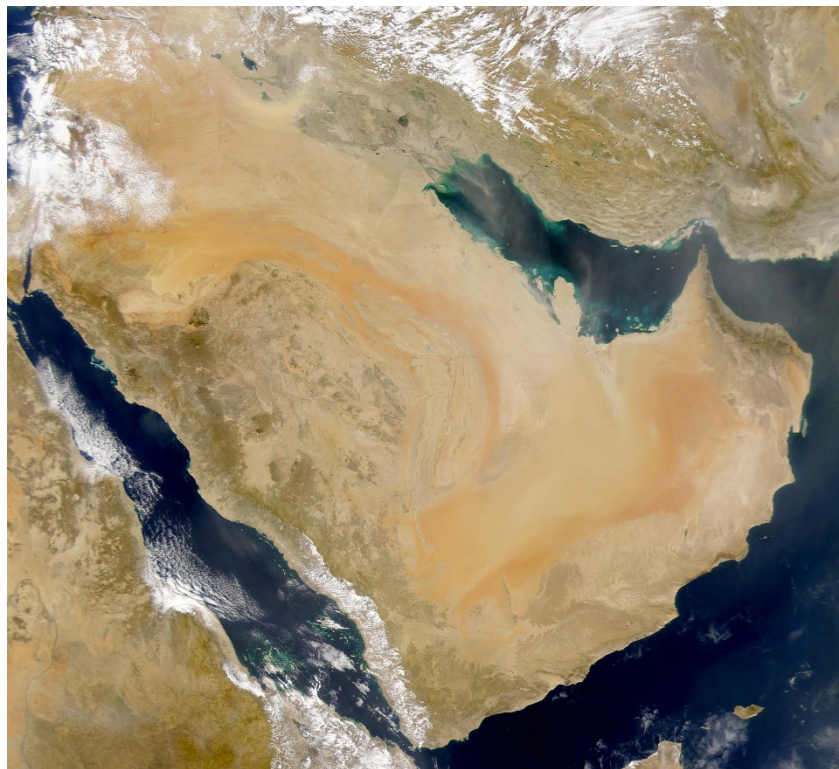
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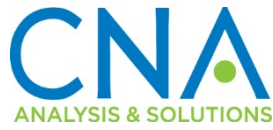
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Deterrence and the Future of U.S.- GCC Defense Cooperation: A Strategic Dialogue Event

Afshon Ostovar

July 2015





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Approved by:

July 2015

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken E. Gause". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Ken E. Gause, Director
International Affairs Group
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Executive Summary

Strategic dynamics in the Middle East are in flux. While conflict and terrorism have eroded stability across the region, a cold war between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors has worsened. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in particular fear their Iranian neighbor's growing influence in the region. They see their security and Sunni dominion in general threatened by the ascendancy of Iran and its Shi'ite allies. Added to this is the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran, which many in the Gulf feel will one day become a reality.

The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 have not lessened this anxiety. Instead, Gulf Arab states believe a deal rewards Iran for bad behavior and puts it on the road to an eventual nuclear weapons capability. Gulf states continue to view the United States as their primary defense partner and as the guarantor of security in the Persian Gulf. However, they question—given current U.S. policies and the pivot to Asia—whether defense ties with the United States will remain sufficient to deter Iran and counter its regional ambitions. That uncertainty has implications for the future of stability and nuclear proliferation in the region.

If nuclear proliferation in the Gulf is to be prevented, the United States will need to have a clear view of its Gulf allies' security concerns. To that end, CNA organized a Track 1.5 forum to encourage dialogue between the United States and its Gulf allies on these issues and to explore the broader questions of deterrence and assurance. The closed-door event brought together officials, scholars, and experts from the United States, the five GCC states (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain), Jordan, and Turkey to engage in an unofficial and not-for-attribution discussion on strategic issues. The event was divided into three panels, each followed by group discussion. Panel topics included nuclear weapons and strategic deterrence in the Gulf; regional perceptions of U.S. policies; and the potential for future nuclear proliferation in the region. Three speakers (one from the United States and two from the region) offered presentations for each panel.

What the event made clear is that even though the Gulf Arab states worry about Iran and are dissatisfied with U.S. policies, they remain reliant on U.S.-provided deterrence. However, their trust in the United States and in its commitment to deter Iran is waning. There is therefore a tension between what the Gulf states want the United States' role in the region to be and what they believe it is or will be in the future. The following are among several key takeaways from the event:

- Increasing mistrust is fundamentally changing GCC perceptions of the United States. A nuclear deal with Iran could worsen U.S.-GCC relations. Gulf Arab states might seek “parity” with Iran after a deal.
- Nuclear proliferation, though a potential component of reaching parity with Iran, might still be unlikely among GCC states.
- Saudi Arabia remains the “wild card” for nuclear proliferation in the Gulf.
- No foreign power can replace the United States as the security guarantor of the Persian Gulf, and GCC states know this.
- GCC states desire closer relations with the United States, access to more advanced ballistic missile technology, and the ability to develop indigenous defense capabilities.

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Introduction

The Middle East is a region in crisis. Violent extremism, trans-state insurgencies, and warfare have plagued the region and eroded many of the structures that kept instability at bay. Helping fuel this instability is the tense rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The decades-long antipathy between these two states, and their competition for legitimacy as leaders of the Muslim world, has transformed into a sectarian cold war. This has divided the Middle East along sectarian and political lines. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies see Iran as an aspiring regional hegemon that exploits relationships with client organizations to spread its influence and project power beyond its borders. Iran's close ties to Shiite organizations (such as Lebanese Hezbollah and numerous militias in Iraq) and support for the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Asad in Syria and the Zaydi-Shia Ansarallah organization (also known as the Houthis) in Yemen, have made Iran's activities in the Middle East appear starkly sectarian to the Sunni monarchies of the GCC. Gulf Arab states fear that Iran is exploiting regional conflicts to create a mostly contiguous, Shiite-dominated, and pro-Iranian zone of influence that spreads west to the Mediterranean and south to Yemen. They further fear that Iran desires to undermine the political authority of the Sunni monarchies through coercive diplomacy, proxies, and other forms of subterfuge.

That fear is underpinned by a more troubling prospect for GCC states: the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran. While the GCC and other regional states (especially Jordan and Turkey) wrestle with the immediate challenges of warfare and instability, they worry that a nuclear-armed Iran would have almost unchecked leverage in regional matters. Above all, as they see it, a nuclear weapons capability would insulate Iran from outside conventional military threats (especially from the United States), which up until recently was the only thing that mitigated Iran's ambitions. Without parallel capabilities, Gulf Arab states are trepidatious that they will lack the wherewithal to defend their equities from Iranian coercion and regional influence.

Instead of allaying these concerns, the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 have increased this anxiety. Gulf Arab states do not think that the rumored parameters of a nuclear deal with Iran go far enough. They believe the deal will leave Iran with much of its nuclear enrichment program intact, and they see any limits on that program to be insufficient. The prevailing view in Gulf Arab capitals is that with or without a deal Iran will at least achieve a nuclear weapons breakout capability (if

not an outright nuclear weapons capability) at some point in the future. They see this as their number one strategic threat.

This is a potential problem for the United States. As the closest Western ally to the GCC and the security guarantor of the Persian Gulf, the United States is considered to be the only viable counterweight to Iran's ambitions. With the pivot to Asia and a potential nuclear deal with Iran, Gulf Arab states are uncertain about America's commitment to their security. That general sense of insecurity is what might propel some Gulf Arab states toward pursuing their own nuclear enrichment and/or weapons programs in response to the Iranians. Preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is of course a major motivation for the P5+1's proposed deal with Iran. However, because Gulf Arab states largely do not view a deal that would allow Iran to retain any enrichment capability as sufficient, it is possible that a deal will not adequately address the GCC's concerns.

In order to assuage GCC fears and prevent nuclear proliferation, the United States needs to have a clear view of its Gulf allies' security concerns and their perspectives on potential options to address those concerns. The GCC will continue to consider the United States the backbone of their deterrence efforts. However, as dynamics in the region change, so too might what is required to provide assurance. Providing adequate assurance to GCC states will be the foundation for any effort to prevent nuclear proliferation in the region. Although the GCC states might harbor unrealistic expectations of their defense ties to the United States, there might be options acceptable to both Washington and its Gulf allies that could mitigate their concerns and obviate any potential reactionary nuclear proliferation.

CNA organized a Track 1.5 forum to encourage dialogue between the United States and its Gulf allies on these issues. The event brought together officials, scholars, and experts from the United States, the six GCC states (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain), Jordan, and Turkey to engage in an unofficial and not-for-attribution discussion on strategic issues. The closed-door setting encouraged frank conversation among the participants, so that regional perceptions and opinions could be explored unhindered by public considerations.

The dialogue took place on 6 May 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey. Holding the event outside the Gulf allowed the GCC participants more comfort to speak their minds—especially on topics where their views conflicted with the official policies of their governments. The location also provided an opportunity to incorporate Turkish as well as Jordanian representatives to participate, which enabled the discussion to occasionally move beyond GCC perspectives, while not diluting the overall goal of the event.

Discussion among participants at the event was blunt and uninhibited. Regional participants spoke directly to one another in both agreement and disagreement, and freely shared their perspectives with the American delegation. They were not bashful

about criticizing U.S. policy or blaming Washington for problems in the region. Many seemed to see the event as an opportunity to convey criticism for U.S. policy and actions directly to Americans of influence. During certain exchanges, regional participants spoke to their American counterparts almost as if the latter represented the current U.S. administration. It was made clear—and regional participants fully understood—however, that the U.S. attendees (like the regional delegates) did not represent any official entity and were speaking in a purely personal capacity. Nonetheless, many of the views expressed by the regional attendees should be considered with that dynamic in mind.

Below is a detailed review of the event. It is divided into four main parts. The first three sections correspond to the event's three panels and the discussion that followed each panel. The fourth part concludes the report and offers key takeaways from the event. Because attendees of the dialogue participated under the explicit promise that their comments would be for nonattribution, we do not identify anyone in the report. Instead, in order to give the reader some context for the comments of each participant, we refer to them vaguely by their professional background and country of origin.

Panel 1: Nuclear Weapons and Strategic Deterrence in the Persian Gulf

The first panel was designed to explore the sensitive question of potential nuclear proliferation in the GCC states and the Middle East more broadly. Panelists were asked to respond to the question from their own perspective and comment on what the potential for nuclear proliferation was in the region. Their responses should take into account both the development of civilian nuclear enrichment programs (beyond what already exists) in regional states outside of Iran and the possible development of nuclear weapons programs (either via breakout capabilities, outright production and tests, or through the procurement of nuclear weapons from a third party such as Pakistan). Regional participants, sometimes prompted by comments from their American counterparts, spoke to the broader questions directly, while generally avoiding specifics.

As was illustrated during the entire event, regional participants did not view the nuclear issue in a vacuum. The issue was therefore difficult for them to speak about in a detailed fashion. Regional participants tended to view the issue of nuclear proliferation as a potential response to a host of other political and strategic considerations, grievances, and anxieties. At the top of the list was the enduring threat of Iran and the fear that a nuclear deal between Iran and the West will leave Iran stronger and put it on the path to developing a nuclear weapons capability.

The panel's first speaker was a former U.S. defense official and senior executive at a defense-focused think tank in the Washington D.C. area. The participant spoke on the prospects for deterrence in the region, alternative options for strengthening GCC deterrence efforts vis-à-vis Iran, and the implications of nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East. These comments began with an underlining point: nuclear weapons are inherently disruptive and "intertwined with security dimensions." This point was followed with another regarding proliferation, which the speaker counseled has not historically "emerged from one state." "This has implications for Iran," he continued, as Iran might not ever choose to develop a nuclear weapon or share its hard-earned knowhow with proxies. Instead Iran would likely gain a deterrent effect from the unclear status of its program, effectively amounting to "deterrence by denial." Iran therefore has incentive to not cross the

nuclear weapons barrier and instead remain content with a potential future breakout capability.

The speaker then turned to deterrence options for the GCC—options for the present and alternatives for the future. The speaker stressed that the United States remained the best guarantor of Gulf security and the most capable defense partner for the GCC. He discussed possible alternative defense partners for the GCC, such as China or India. Neither in his estimation—for a number of reasons, including limited capabilities, capacities, and political will—could (or would) provide the GCC with the same security assurances as the United States. The only potential alternative is France, which has important ties to the region, a strong military, a strong commitment to foreign military sales and assistance, and perhaps the political will to forge such a partnership with the GCC. Although regional participants seemed to agree with this assessment, none seemed to take the thought very seriously. There was no follow-on discussion exploring France as an alternative to the United States, nor was a possible future French-GCC defense pact discussed.

The speaker concluded his comments with a note on the problems of proliferation. Warning against a GCC decision to match or counter Iran’s capability with a nuclear program (or programs) of its own, the speaker highlighted escalation dynamics as being the most serious implication of nuclear proliferation. He used the example of Pakistan and India to argue that “escalation dynamics could grow horizontally,” making the prospect of nuclear war an inherent danger in any military standoff or conflict.

The second panelist, an academic and executive at a strategic issues-focused research organization in Jordan, argued against the need for nuclear proliferation in Arab states. The panelist began with a central assertion: “Iran’s nuclear file [has been] addressed,” the implication being that an expected nuclear deal would adequately limit Iranian enrichment production, introduce increased monitoring and other safeguards, and prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. In other words, the speaker did not view Iran’s nuclear program as a threat to the Middle East and considered the issue to likely be resolved through negotiations and a deal. He followed up this comment by stating that Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile had likewise been dealt with.

From the speaker’s perspective, the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East was therefore low. For this reason, he considered it unwise and counterproductive for Arab states to pursue nuclear enrichment programs in response to the Iranian program or in response to a nuclear deal. He used the example of Israel to argue that possessing nuclear weapons does not deter outside attacks, as evinced over the decades by attacks on Israel by Arab states and nonstate actors (e.g., Egypt, Iraq, Hezbollah, Hamas, etc.). A tacit nuclear weapons capability likely will not buffer Iran from outside attacks, nor serve as an insurmountable deterrent to its enemies. Developing a nuclear weapons capability in response to Iran

would not completely safeguard Gulf Arab states or prevent Iran from meddling or sponsoring clients in their countries either. This is because, the speaker argued, “nuclear deterrence makes no sense in a geographically confined region” such as the Middle East. The region is simply too small for the use of nuclear weapons to be strategically viable. Any state that used a nuclear weapon against a regional foe would incur hazardous blowback and likely disastrous political implications. The threat of nuclear weapons usage in the region will correspondingly lack credibility.

The final panelist was a former senior military officer from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He began his comments by exploring the idea that isolation and sanctions encourage rather than inhibit nuclear weapons interest and development. North Korea and, to a much lesser extent, South Africa were held up as the primary examples of the failure of sanctions and isolation policies. Such a relationship between sanctions and nuclear development is also exemplified by Iran, whom the speaker argued was spurred by sanctions to “vastly increase its numbers [of] centrifuges.” Far from being discouraged by sanctions, sanctions helped transform Iran into “a nuclear threshold state.”

The speaker then turned to the topic of U.S.-GCC defense relations, beginning with the thesis: “extended deterrence is not practical.” The reasons for this were many, according to the former senior military official, but the main reason was that “the Pentagon puts too many limits on assistance.” From the speaker’s experience, dealing with American counterparts was cumbersome, difficult, and included wading through too much bureaucracy and red tape to be efficient. He offered the example of one program that included giving the UAE access to a satellite early warning system. While this form of assistance was welcome in theory, it was untenable in practice because the UAE military had to give advance notice and seek the Pentagon’s approval each time it wanted to use the system. In the theater of conflict, or in a surprise attack, such convoluted protocols would be inefficient and counterproductive.

For the speaker, the indignities of such needlessly complex agreements evinced a fundamental and more problematic truth: Washington simply did not trust its Arab “partners.” The speaker used hand quotes in saying “partners” to indicate that America’s Arab allies did not feel that they were seen as equal partners with the United States—a theme that was brought up continually by many participants during the day.

A related point of grievance expressed by the former senior military officer was that Washington’s policies in the Middle East were tantamount to a double standard. That is, in his view Iran was allowed to make gains despite its hostile behavior, whereas the Arabs were prevented from advancing their military and defense capabilities even though they have remained faithful allies of the United States. He saw this particularly in the realm of ballistic missile defense (BMD), where Arab states are prevented from developing the same BMD capabilities that Iran has been developing.

In his words, the U.S. policy toward the Middle East could be summed up by the phrase “halal for everyone, haram for us [GCC/Arab states].” That is, what is allowable (*halal*) to others (such as indigenous BMD) is impermissible (*haram*) to states such as the UAE. The speaker followed this point with a rhetorical question: “Would the U.S. or E.U. allow the GCC the same capabilities as Iran has now?” He continued, “Reaching parity [with Iran] is essential deterrence.” Above all, this point—that to effectively deter Iran, GCC states required parity with their neighbor—was at the core of the former senior officer’s presentation and his comments expressed throughout the remainder of the day. The speaker concluded by stating, “There is no belief in the GCC that the U.S. offers effective strategic deterrence.” This conviction will persist, he continued, until Washington’s attitude shifts from one of providing “strategic deterrence” to its Gulf partners to one of building deterrence with its “strategic partners.”

Panel 1: Discussion

A brief discussion period followed the first panel’s presentations. To give it shape, we asked each participant to respond to a single question: how would an Iranian nuclear deal impact U.S.-GCC deterrence relations? This question spurred some frank responses by the regional panelists. Speaker three, the retired Emirati military official, commented bluntly that he was “not optimistic” about the future of U.S.-GCC defense relations after a deal. He argued that there was a fundamental lack of respect and a clear inequity in how the United States treated its Gulf partners. Washington “informs but doesn’t consult” the GCC on its Middle East policies. Washington further does not “take the advice” of the GCC states, nor does it “listen” to their counsel on regional issues. He suggested that the only way to create an effective deterrent to Iran in the Gulf would be to build that deterrence through the development of indigenous capabilities in GCC states.

The second panelist, from Jordan, had a more hopeful response. He was encouraged by President Obama’s 2011 Cairo speech, saying that the speech was “important” and expressed “lots of hope” for U.S. policy in the Middle East. He further contended that the “central challenge” for the region was not Iran, which he considered to be dealt with assuming a nuclear deal is made with the P5+1. Rather, he suggested, it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was the root of the region’s troubles. Solving that would gradually solve the problem of extremism, he argued, because Palestine was the main motivating factor pushing Arab youth toward extremism. This was not a popular comment among the regional participants, with many shaking their heads in disagreement. That visual—a room of former senior Gulf officials, academics, and defense experts in obvious disagreement—illustrated the Jordanian’s final comment that there was “no unity, no agreement on key issues” among Arab states. He called it

a clash of identity—perhaps more accurately rendered as a lack of focus—within Arab states that has led to the current morass of discord and instability.

The former Pentagon official who served as the first speaker of the day offered a few comments on U.S. policy. He began by explaining his view on the Asia rebalance. The pivot, he explained, was important to the United States because the “economic gravity” of the Asia-Pacific region was too great for Washington to ignore. He proposed that the United States cannot choose between these regions and would remain a part of the Middle East for the foreseeable future. However, he argued, that does not mean that the United States can limit hegemonic powers such as Iran or China in either region. Something that, he implied, the GCC states should come to accept.

As an alternative, the speaker presented some ideas on how the United States could support deterrence measures in the GCC—all of which received enthusiastic support from regional participants. First, Washington should begin to view precision-guided munitions as a way to buffer deterrence and avoid the proliferation of WMD in the Gulf. The speaker highlighted the value of precision-guided missiles in developing effective air and sea access denial—a capability that would strengthen GCC security vis-à-vis threats posed by Iran. On this point, the former Pentagon official suggested that Washington should move beyond the confines of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty (which banned ballistic missile delivery systems ranging from 500-5000 km) as a step that could be taken to help incorporate ballistic missile defense systems into the security architecture of Gulf states. Finally, the United States should consider forward basing additional forces in the region to help deterrence efforts. While several regional participants nodded in agreement to that last point, the majority showed much more enthusiastic support for the speaker’s suggestion of bringing precision-guided missiles to the Gulf and rethinking the INF treaty ban on delivery systems.

Comments from the participants followed. A senior Qatari academic and researcher at a Doha-based policy organization reiterated the point (made earlier by the former Emirati defense official) that the U.S. supports a double standard in the region: “Iran can have, Arabs cannot,” he said. He emphasized that the U.S. and Arab states should have good relations and that Washington should know that “the Arabs are its friends.” A senior Emirati political scientist agreed with this sentiment, arguing that the United States does not treat its Arab “partners” as partners. A prime example—and common grievance among the participants—was that the GCC had not been asked to be a part of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran. He more broadly blamed the United States for the major problems currently affecting the region.

A Kuwaiti academic and a senior Saudi journalist both pushed back on this point and argued that the region’s problems were rooted in internal pathologies, not external policy matters. The Kuwaiti suggested that Arab states put too much stock in their relationship with the United States and view Washington as the only one that can fix

their problems. As he put it, “D.C. is treated as Mecca instead of the real Mecca.” The senior Saudi journalist argued that the region’s issues were primarily social and cultural, not strategic. “The Arab world will have the same problems even without Iran,” he said. Because of this, the solution to current dilemmas is not something that Washington can provide, rather “an indigenous [Arab] answer is required.”

At this point, a senior Pentagon official who had recently transitioned out from his government post (and who would serve on the next panel), posed a question to the regional participants: Could the “proliferation of nuclear threshold states increase stability” in the region? A Kuwaiti academic responded that Arab states want to establish bi-polarity in the region (such as in the Cold War) as a way to avoid a major inter-state regional war. He said this “balance of terror” was essential to deterring Iran from using its nuclear status as leverage for coercive actions. He argued that, because Arabs want the same leverage as Iran possesses, “nuclear parity is inevitable.” A WMD-free Middle East is a “pipe dream,” he concluded, and not a policy Arab states are any longer inclined to support.

Panel 2: Regional Perceptions of U.S. Policy and the Impact on Strategic Deterrence Thinking

Perceptions of U.S. policy—its failures, trends, and intentions—are inseparable from strategic thinking and decision making in the Gulf. Regional strategic thought is largely derived as a reaction to current U.S. policy or in anticipation of what U.S. policy might be. For this reason, the second panel was designed to give regional participants an opportunity to comment on U.S. regional policies. Their comments serve as an example of how U.S. Middle East policy is viewed in the region. Because of the importance of U.S. relations to GCC states, how these states understand U.S. policy is a key factor in their own determinations on defense and strategic issues. It is the context for decision making in the Gulf and is therefore vital for U.S. officials to consider. Although the speakers on this panel addressed the issue, much of the commentary moved beyond views on U.S. policy. This is likely due to the robust discussion following the first panel in which many participants took the opportunity to comment on and express frustration with U.S. Middle East policy. What filled the void was a broader discussion on Syria and other regional matters.

The first speaker—a former U.S. Department of Defense official who had recently left his position at the Pentagon and was speaking in a personal capacity—began his comments with a statement that resonated deeply with regional participants. He acknowledged that the main issue after a nuclear deal will be Iran’s role in the region. He assured the room that the United States was thinking a lot about this issue and would not walk away from its regional allies. He pointed to standing U.S. commitments to the region as a proof that Washington valued its partnerships with Middle East states. The United States “already has robust defense systems and forces in the Gulf,” he said. Between that and other defense commitments, the former Pentagon official suggested that Washington saw itself as doing a lot already “to help provide deterrence and assure allies.” However, he suggested, the Pentagon needs to form closer relations with its GCC counterparts. Closer contacts between U.S. and regional defense officials could do a lot to bridge the divide, help clarify misunderstandings, and strengthen defense relations. Greater U.S. support will not solve the region’s problems, he stated. The GCC needs to take more “ownership” on regional issues. In particular, the GCC could do a lot more in Syria than it is doing currently.

The next speaker was a Kuwaiti political scientist. The thrust of his talk was that the United States destabilized the Middle East by allowing the ascendancy of Iraqi Shiites in post-Saddam Iraq. The fall of Saddam “ended the [regional] balance of power with Iran.” All problems in the region stem from this, he argued. He then quoted several op-eds written by former Bush administration officials criticizing the Obama administration’s Middle East policies as a way to illustrate the central tenets of his argument that Iran was the main problem in the region and that the United States was not doing enough to counter Iranian influence. “Iran is ascendant, [and] there is a Cold War atmosphere in the Gulf,” he said.

The GCC “feels abandoned” by the U.S.-Iran “rapprochement.” GCC states feel that they are not true partners of the United States, but rather “junior partners.” (This phrase “junior partners” gained currency among many of the participants and continued to be used sarcastically and with air quotes during the remainder of the day’s discussion.) From the speaker’s perspective, the GCC is asked to be the “ATM for U.S. policies in the region” but has little input into the crafting of those policies. The persistence of such a view inside the Gulf has led to the belief that Gulf Arab contributions to U.S. efforts in the region are taken for granted and not adequately appreciated by Washington. There is a general dissatisfaction about the GCC’s relations with the United States, but the GCC still seeks closer ties, not a distancing. What the Gulf states would like is a partnership with the United States that more closely resembles the latter’s partnerships with Japan and South Korea. A closer and more equitable partnership would help facilitate more coherent and successful policies in the region, he suggested, and help pave the way for stronger regional defenses. In particular, he cited the GCC’s need for drones and precision strike ballistic missiles in order to help it counter Iran’s “ambition to become [a regional] hegemon.”

A senior Saudi diplomatic scholar was the third speaker on the panel. His general thesis was that the United States does not understand the values and concerns of its GCC partners. “Does the U.S. recognize Arab needs?” he asked rhetorically. He pointed to current regional conflicts and argued that the only thing Arab states see is the suffering of Sunnis at the hands of Shiites and Iranian proxies. He said that this was causing outrage in the Gulf and implied that it was what was behind the influx of Sunni youth into the ranks of extremist groups like ISIS and Nusra Front. To begin to assuage this rising sense of indignation, the GCC decided to take action against the Houthis in Yemen. He saw the mission against the Houthis as an assertion of GCC unity, something the member states were “very proud” of. He called the *fitna* [i.e., conflict] between Sunni and Shia in the region to be the biggest threat to security and stability. Building on this point, and with the example of the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq as background, he suggested that democracy “can’t work in the region.” “We have our own traditions,” he said, implying that U.S. efforts to encourage democracy in the region were misplaced.

Panel 2: Discussion

We began the discussion by posing a question about the rumored united Arab military force. Responses were mostly skeptical. No one was particularly bullish on the prospect and most thought that the initiative would not amount to much. The former Pentagon official who spoke on the second panel summed up the feeling that many in the room seemed to share: “It’s a good idea. I doubt it will work.” The American’s copanelist, the Kuwaiti political scientist, added that the GCC has not fully embraced the idea. “It’s an Egyptian-led project,” he said. “Cairo is more enthused about it than anyone else.” He continued to explain that its *raison d’être* was unclear. And that because current conflicts are being driven by nonstate actors, he was unsure how a conventional military alliance would be effective. “How can the united Arab force combat such a threat?” he asked rhetorically.

A senior Qatari academic countered that the “only solution to ISIS” must come from a joint Sunni Arab military force. Along similar lines, a senior Kuwaiti academic said that the “Arab mindset” was such that there “must always be an [external] enemy.” First it was the Ottomans, then the Brits, then Zionism, and now [it’s] Iran.” However, he cautioned, the current woes in the region and Iran’s growing influence are not the fault of the United States. Rather, it was the “Arabs” who “failed to support post-Saddam Iraq” and gave Iran the opportunity to exploit the power vacuum.

These points were countered by a retired Emirati senior military official, who suggested that the United States was the key to the region’s problems and the only one that could effectively combat ISIS. Even so, he questioned U.S. commitment to the war against ISIS and asked whether Washington was even “serious about combating ISIS.” This comment was a return to the main grievance shared by many regional participants in the room, which was a general dissatisfaction with U.S. policy and a feeling that the GCC was being asked to back U.S. efforts in the region without having a say in what those efforts were. As a senior Saudi journalist added, Saudi Arabia has come to the conclusion that it can no longer be “the gas station or bankrollers” for U.S. policy. Instead, the new Saudi monarch, King Salman, and other GCC leaders feel that they need to be in charge of determining their own self-interests. In other words, Saudi Arabia no longer feels that it can rely on Washington to secure its interests in the region. Instead, Saudi Arabia feels that it must take the lead in pursuing more assertive regional policies than it has previously to counteract Iranian influence and promote its interests and those of its GCC allies.

Panel 3: Strategic Deterrence and Nonproliferation in the Middle East: Future Outlook

The third panel was designed to discuss the future of strategic deterrence in the Middle East. In particular, we asked the panelists to offer their thoughts on the question of proliferation and if they thought nonproliferation was possible for the region. While each panelist commented on the central topic, the regional panelists moved beyond that issue to explore the complex dynamics that will shape future regional security. They stressed that social and cultural problems in the Middle East would be greater determinants of future security than military dynamics or nuclear proliferation.

A senior Saudi journalist was the panel's first speaker. Unlike most of the participants, the speaker deemphasized the threat posed by Iran. He considered it exaggerated and a distraction from the real issues affecting his country and the region more broadly. He implied that the Iranian and Shiite threats were overemphasized by regional governments to distract their people from growing social and economic inequities. In his view, "strategic problems will be made worse over time due to cultural and social problems." He pointed to rising unemployment, population growth, a youth bulge, regressive policies toward women, and the spread of extremism as the biggest issues facing the region.

The speaker was less specific when it came to the issue of nuclear proliferation. He implied that some countries in the region might possibly want to match Iran's nuclear program with their own, but overall, he thought this was the wrong way to look at regional security. He returned to a familiar issue—perceptions of inequality in U.S.-GCC relations. He argued that this relationship must be one of equals and cannot be perceived as a "master-servant" relationship. If the GCC were to feel that Washington took its concerns seriously and considered it an equal, then U.S. policy concerns could gain more traction in the region. This, he suggested, was the best approach the United States could take to help prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

The second presentation was given by an American nuclear proliferation expert. The Switzerland-based analyst provided an overview of what he considered to be the

limits of proliferation in most Middle East countries. Some countries, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, are simply too small to house adequate nuclear programs. Others, such as Oman, lack the desire to do so. Ultimately, he thought the only states in which nuclear programs may be viable are the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Jordan is considered an outlier due to the discovery of uranium deposits in the country. However, he also considered certain constraints that could prevent these countries from going nuclear. Political considerations in Egypt, Turkey's membership in NATO, and the UAE's 1-2-3 nuclear agreement with the United States (wherein it promises not to enrich uranium or process spent plutonium from its reactors in exchange for civilian nuclear assistance) all make proliferation in these countries unlikely but not impossible.

Saudi Arabia, however, was the "real wild card" from his perspective. Saudi Arabia has the size, political power, and wealth to make a complex nuclear enrichment program viable. Its rivalry with Iran, which has grown increasingly over the last decade, might serve as suitable motivation for pursuing a nuclear deterrent that matches whatever Iran is believed to possess down the road. The quest for parity with Iran—both in terms of regional influence and military power—could propel Riyadh to develop or obtain a nuclear weapons capacity. A rumor that is almost accepted as fact by some in the region is that Saudi Arabia has already purchased either nuclear weapons or has access to nuclear weapons (should the need arise) from Pakistan. This is not how proliferation generally works, he added, but it can't be ruled out as a possibility either.

The day's final speaker was a senior Turkish academic and university department head. She agreed with the panel's first speaker that most of the region's problems exist below the strategic level. For her the issues that will continue to put the most pressure on regional governments are social, cultural, and economic. The problems affecting youth (unemployment, limited civil society, and extremism) will increasingly impact the security of states. She suggested that the current conflicts in the region are ultimately rooted in these social and cultural ills—problems that, if not solved, will continue to plague the region and fuel its violence.

The speaker then turned to her own country, Turkey, and commented on its views on nuclear proliferation. She affirmed that the NATO partnership will remain the bedrock of Turkey's strategic policy in the future. However, she argued that NATO's nuclear shield is no longer considered vital to Ankara because Turkey no longer views foreign powers, such as Russia, as a threat to its security. Rather, the most serious threats to Turkey are seen as coming from "lower-level, asymmetrical enemies." Nonstate actors (loosely defined) are increasingly considered by Ankara to be the biggest source of domestic and regional instability. Turkey believes this trend will continue, especially if the conflict in Syria is allowed to churn along and Assad remains in power.

Panel 3: Discussion

After the third panel, we opened up the floor for closing comments. Many participants took this opportunity to restate points that they had made earlier in the day. Others saw it as the last chance to remind their American hosts of the many failures of U.S. policy. Overall, the comments expressed during this concluding discussion can be divided into three broad themes: the U.S. future role in the region; the failures of American policy; and sectarianism.

Views on America's future role in the region were mixed. Some regional participants questioned whether doubts about Washington's commitment to the region were misplaced. Others argued that the United States' own self-declared pivot-to-Asia was fanciful and would not change the U.S. role in the region. As a senior Emirati academic argued, even if the U.S. military presence in Asia grows, it will not leave the Gulf. That is because the United States sees itself as the "stabilizer of the [world's] oil market" and would not risk leaving that job to someone else. After all, he concluded, Washington's Asian allies need oil too.

Blame was placed on the United States for just about everything wrong in the Middle East. The majority of regional participants presented their criticism from generally one of two angles: a) America's interventions have caused the region's problems; or b) America's lack of intervention has caused the region's problems. Many regional participants argued both points. A Kuwaiti scholar argued that Iran's power had grown because the United States failed to counter it, which in turn caused extremism among Sunnis to increase. Similarly, a senior Saudi academic said that the United States is still "the international police" and should be doing more for peace in the region. A former GCC official from Oman added that the United States needed to lead a development plan for the Middle East. In his view the problems in the region are rooted in social and cultural causes and only a dramatic development mission "like the Marshall Plan" can address those issues.

Finally, several participants commented on the issue of sectarianism. Many agreed that sectarianism is a major threat to the region, and all but three participants (an Omani official, a Saudi journalist, and a Kuwaiti academic) thought that the policies of Middle East states had any role in the rise of sectarianism. Rather, the majority of regional participants put the blame squarely on the United States and Iran for the problem of sectarianism. As a retired senior Emirati military official argued bluntly, Paul Bremer was ultimately the source of the problem for his role in sidelining Sunnis in post-Saddam Iraq. The Emirati continued that sectarianism began only with the creation of Iraq's democratic constitution, which allowed the Shiites to enter power based on their demographic advantage. The solution proposed by the Emirati, without a hint of sarcasm, was that "the U.S. should change the Iraqi constitution." When an American participant asked if the retired Emirati official truly believed that

Washington could “just change the Iraqi constitution, unilaterally, whenever it wants,” the Emirati responded, “Of course. You’ve done it before.”

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

Strategic dynamics in the Middle East are in the midst of severe disruption. It is unclear what the political and power structures of the region will be when the dust finally settles. Gulf Arab states view current instability through absolutist perspectives. Iran's hegemonic ambitions and Washington's acquiescence to those ambitions is at the root of every problem in the region. While the Gulf Arab states worry about Iran and complain about U.S. policies, their reliance on U.S.-provided deterrence continues to grow. However, their trust in the United States and in its commitment to deter Iran is waning. There is therefore a tension between what the Gulf states want the United States' role in the region to be and what they believe it is or will be in the future.

The GCC's mistrust inherently makes providing assurance more difficult for the United States. It might also complicate or diminish the United States' effectiveness in stemming nuclear proliferation in the region should Arab states determine that they require nuclear capabilities to effectively deter an ascendant Iran. These topics were at the heart of the strategic dialogue event. Below we discuss the major themes from the day's discussion that have strategic implications for the United States. These themes represent the views of regional participants and our perspective on those views. Taken together, they comprise the takeaways we deem most important for U.S. officials to consider regarding Gulf relations. They also serve as our concluding thoughts on the event.

- **Increasing mistrust is fundamentally changing GCC perceptions of the United States.** U.S. Middle East policy is unpopular with Gulf Arab states. Washington's refusal to topple the Assad regime, its alliance with the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government in the war against ISIS, and the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran have particularly eroded confidence in the U.S. role in the region. As a result, mistrust is increasing in Gulf Arab capitals regarding U.S. policies and the intentions behind them. Gulf leaders are skeptical about U.S. commitments to the region and see many current policies as antithetical to their interests.
- **A nuclear deal with Iran could worsen U.S.-GCC relations.** There is a deep cynicism in most GCC states (Oman is the lone exception) regarding the wisdom and viability of reaching a deal on Iran's nuclear program. Despite some statements by GCC officials in support of the deal following the May

2015 Camp David Summit, the prevailing view in the GCC is that a deal will not be effective at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Instead, they see it as something that will further insulate the Iranian regime and put it on the road to developing a nuclear weapons capability. They further fear that once a deal has been signed, it will open the door for a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, which in turn will lead to Washington placing more favor on Iranian interests than on those of Arab states. For this reason, they see the United States' pursuit of a deal as both naïve and something almost akin to a betrayal of its GCC allies. It is therefore likely that reaching a deal will have a negative impact on U.S.-Gulf relations.

- **Gulf Arab states might seek “parity” with Iran after a deal.** A consistent theme in the dialogue was that Gulf Arab states aspire to reach parity with Iran. This theme was most strongly advocated by the Saudi, Emirati, and Kuwaiti delegates. It was heavily implied through our discussions that the GCC feels it cannot currently effectively compete with Iran in three areas: regional influence (e.g., having a strong and effective proxy network), ballistic missile capabilities, and the nuclear arena. Iran's superiority in these areas is a problem for the Gulf states—and one they want to solve through establishing actual or effective parity with Iranian capabilities. The pursuit of parity, in their perspective, is necessary to counter Iranian regional influence and negate its ability to use coercive tactics as leverage in regional affairs.
- **Though a potential component of reaching parity with Iran, nuclear proliferation among GCC states might still be unlikely.** Although the term parity suggests that GCC states want to develop a nuclear weapons program in response to Iran (or something approximate—if not superior—to what they perceive to be Iran's nuclear capabilities), the majority lacks the capacity and will to do so. Most GCC states are either incapable or unwilling to pursue a nuclear program. Less predictable are Saudi Arabia and UAE. Though the UAE has the size, defense interests, and nascent capabilities to make a nuclear enrichment program viable, it also has a 1-2-3 nuclear agreement with the United States that severely limits what its nuclear program can be. To advance its program along the lines of Iran's, the UAE would have to walk away from the 1-2-3 agreement, which could damage its ties to Washington and undermine its reputation in the international community. At present there is no clear sign that it would be willing to take those risks in response to an Iran deal.
- **Saudi Arabia remains the “wild card” for nuclear proliferation in the Gulf.** Saudi Arabia is a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It also possesses a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, even despite those international agreements, the kingdom's nuclear intentions remain

murky. That is because Riyadh's current calculations on whether to pursue a nuclear enrichment program with potential military dimensions (or procure access to nuclear weapons from Pakistan) appear to be linked to its perception of the Iranian threat—particularly if Iran were to ratify a nuclear deal with the P5+1. If Iran's influence via clients in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen continues to grow in the midterm, and if Saudi Arabia feels that it both lacks the capabilities to counter that influence and perceives the United States as equally incapable or unwilling to do so, then it might pursue policies such as a nuclear program as a matter of deterrence. If Iran cannot be marginalized through sanctions or international pressure, then Saudi Arabia might be inclined to pursue a policy of bi-polarity in regional power politics, with it and Iran as the two centers of gravity. Either way, if the trend of Iran's growing influence continues, Saudi Arabia will have to make strategic choices on how to counter Iranian influence. In the GCC's joint military operations against the Houthis in Yemen, Saudi's new monarch, King Salman, has proved to be more assertive of Saudi's interests than his predecessor. The belief among regional participants was that such forward-leaning policies would continue and that Saudi Arabia will begin to take on a more active role in directly countering Iranian proxies and regional influence. Establishing a nuclear enrichment program parallel to the Iranian program is one way that regional participants felt Saudi Arabia might decide to do that.

- **No foreign power can replace the United States as the security guarantor of the Persian Gulf and GCC states know this.** U.S.-provided assurance remains central to GCC deterrence efforts and could remain key to preventing nuclear proliferation. Despite the near bottomless list of complaints levied against U.S. policies by the regional participants, it was clear that they saw no alternative to the United States remaining the security guarantor for the Gulf, nor did they desire an alternative. Participants did not take seriously comments suggesting France, India, or China as a potential future replacement for the United States in the Gulf. What did become a focus, however, were the steps that the United States could take to improve relations and assurance efforts, particularly in response to a deal.
- **GCC states desire closer relations with the United States, access to more advanced ballistic missile technology, and the ability to develop indigenous defense capabilities.** For the regional participants, the fundamental divide between Gulf Arab states and Washington was a lack of trust. They saw this in (what they perceived to be) the limits imposed by Washington on their defense programs. Such limits—such as those stemming from the INF treaty—prevented GCC states from developing adequate ballistic missile defense systems capable of deterring Iran's robust ballistic missile program. They further wanted a fundamental change in defense relations with the United States, wherein the latter would help GCC states

develop their own defense capabilities and not simply provide access to capabilities that required constant U.S. oversight or permission to use.

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